

St Mary's Church



A Brief History

A Brief History of St Mary's Church

The present church is the sixth on the site of the Saxon town of Hamwic (Hamton). Early records are sketchy, but the first church was thought to have been built around AD 634 during the time when St Birinus arrived at the port on his evangelistic mission to this country. Documentation refers to a 'manorial church' assumed to be St Mary's, and the first recorded priest and holder of the benefice was named as Richerius (1086). The Saxon town survived many invasions and ravages by the Danes but eventually fell into decline and in the time of King Canute in the 11th century the population moved to the safety of the Norman medieval settlement to the west. However, St Mary's continued to be of significant importance as the Mother Church, with its claims to tithes, burial rights and privileges reflecting its status.

The historian Leland writes in 1546 of the rebuilding in the 12th century of the ancient church of St Mary on the instruction of Queen Matilda on account of its poor and inadequate state. This, the second church, served for four hundred years and was the principal place of worship in spite of being outside the walled town. Around 1550 St Mary's was in ruins, or possibly could have been pulled down because the spire was considered a landmark for French invaders. Many records were destroyed by fire in later years but it is known that rubble from the building was used to make the highway from the Bargate via East Street to the Chantry. The remaining chancel continued to be repaired spasmodically and used up to 1711 when Archdeacon Brideoak instigated the building of a new church by adding a nave, but eventually in 1723 the chancel was also replaced.

Although continuing to retain its status, St Mary's was still a church somewhat detached from the main town of Southampton. However, on becoming a fashionable spa the population grew and spread to the outlying areas by the end of the 18th century, so benefiting the church also. On the arrival of Francis North, Rector, the building was enlarged and altered

substantially and re-consecrated in 1833. In 1838, at the commencement of the building of the docks, there was an influx of labourers anxious to be near their place of work, so the land surrounding the church was used to build houses so there was a further increase in population. Meanwhile, poor construction of the 1833 church alterations revealed considerable deterioration, and in the 1870's Bishop Samuel Wilberforce sought advice from the eminent architect G.C. Street who condemned the building.

On the death of the Bishop, the subsequent re-building under the Rectorship of his son, Canon Basil Wilberforce, was destined to become his memorial, and in 1878 the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) consented to lay the foundation stone. The church was then consecrated in 1879 and completed in 1884, with the exception of the tower and spire which were added in 1912-1914. A peal of eight bells was given in memory of Robert Wingrove by his widow Mary Ann Wingrove in 1913, and a further two were added in 1934. The Bells of St Mary's became famous through the song written and composed by Douglas Furber and Australian A. Emmett Adams during the period of the Great War of 1914-1918 as they sailed from Southampton. It was introduced into the U.S.A. in 1917 and became the College Song of the New York State Maritime College, and later made famous by Bing Crosby.

On November 30th 1940 incendiary bombs destroyed the church leaving a damaged tower, bells, Baptistry and Vestry. At the end of the War Canon Spencer Leeson (1946-1950) and the church council took the decision to restore the bells - "thus giving encouragement and visible witness of the determination to rebuild once again". A final decision to complete the rebuilding of the entire church was not made until the early 1950's. The town was in ruins and this was not deemed to be a priority as worship was being maintained in the Chantry Hall. An offer from the town council to allocate a new site for a town church in East Park Terrace had been turned down in 1946 and the diocese had reservations about the viability of such a

large building, and money was being directed towards the construction of new churches in growing outlying areas of the town. Consequently, the tower was restored and the bells rededicated in 1948. The Bishop of Salisbury the Right Reverend Neville Lovett, who as Rector, had urged forward the completion of the tower and spire in 1912 - 1914, and who placed the cross on top of the spire at that time, returned to participate in the restoration service.

The rebuilding of the sixth church was finally begun in February 1954 and completed and consecrated in June 1956. The Rector, the Revd H.C.N. Williams, was the driving force throughout this period and he re-established the church in the life of Southampton. However, by the mid-sixties changes within city centres were being considered by the Diocese. Population movements and the introduction of light industry in the St Mary's district meant that there was not sufficient need for the six churches in relatively close proximity. Re-organisation and re-assessment of the ministry of the church eventually led to the setting up of the Southampton Team Ministry and the formation of the City Centre Parish in 1973 based upon just two churches – St Mary's and St Michael's. Since then the character of Chapel has changed considerably and the bustling local shopping centre is no more, due to major re-developments. Now in recent years extensive building has been taking place, revitalising the area, and it is hoped that the Mother Church of St Mary's will continue to serve the parish and city in the years to come.

